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Variations on Darwin

Julia Briggs, Dennis Butts, M.O. Grenby (eds.), *Popular Children's Literature in Britain*

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REFERENCES

Julia Briggs, Dennis Butts, M.O. Grenby (eds.), *Popular Children's Literature in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 342 p., ISBN: 978-1-84014-242-6

- 1 What is a “popular” children’s book? How can we gauge the popularity of children’s literature, knowing that children’s reading choices and interests are controlled and framed by adults? Julia Briggs, Dennis Butts and M.O. Grenby’s *Popular Children's Literature in Britain* tries to bring to the fore notions of popularity and means of assessing it. This edited collection looks at definitions of the “popular” and examines the relationships between popular literature and children’s literature. As suggested, whether “popular” means “enduring”, “commercial” or “vulgar”, the term becomes more problematic when related to children’s literature. Indeed, the popularity of children’s literature must be examined while bearing in mind what publishers offer, at what price and what parents, educators or librarians choose to read or distribute as well. Thus, the interpretation of sales figures as an index of popularity hardly helps to understand what children really like reading and why. Moreover, the way popularity is today ensured by the connections of children’s books and other media, such as television or cinematic adaptations or other types of merchandising, complicates further the definition of the popular.
- 2 The collection is divided into four parts. The first part, on the adaptability of chapbooks and fairy stories, opens with an essay by M.O. Brendy. Brendy’s chapter gives an overview of exactly who read chapbooks in the later eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries—hence before the emergence of children’s literature. Brendy first

gives a loose definition of chapbooks, defined either by the way they were carried into villages or towns by chapmen, by their form, their low price or their plebeian content and tone. In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance chapbooks were read by children and adults alike—even affluent children. But gradually, as a new children's literature rose, scholars generally contend that chapbooks were dismissed in favour of more educational books praising industry: as a case in point, Brendy mentions Andrew O'Malley's *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late eighteenth century* (Routledge, 2003), which suggests that Newbery's publications were explicitly written in opposition to chapbook values. In fact, Brendy argues, the chapbook evolved during the early nineteenth century, becoming intended exclusively for children. The point that Brendy wants to make is that the chapbook, even through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, constantly stood at the crossroads between children's literature and popular literature: it permeated children's literature and never was a foil to children's books, precluding thereby its separation from a distinct literature for children. Brendy's essay is followed by Kevin Carpenter's study of the way Robin Hood was rewritten in boys' weeklies from the beginning of the nineteenth century to 1919. Carpenter particularly focuses on the figure of Robin Hood and its ambiguities in Victorian and Edwardian boys' weeklies, as these versions sometimes gave a subversive face to the outlaw by presenting his life as riotous. The multiple rewritings of Robin Hoods are followed by David Blamires's tracing of rewritings of Madame d'Aulnoy's fairy tales, more especially the circulation of "The White Cat", so as to examine the salon fairy tale's entry into popular culture. As Blamires shows, though initially written for adults, the tale's abridgements, simplifications and adaptations (even for pantomimes) explains why it gradually became assimilated with traditional children's tales throughout the nineteenth century, as the market for children grew and technical developments ensured ever more attractive books. Part 1 closes on George Speaight and Brian Alderson's study of the penetration of pantomime into the world of children's books. It looks at fairies on the stage, at a time when the theatre was also aimed at children, as typified by the fashion for toy theatres. The author's study of the way manifestations typically associated with popular culture (from tales to legends) reappeared in new formats intended for children (pantomimes, "harlequinades", chapbooks) brings to light the importance of the theatre in explorations of the links between popular culture and children's culture.

- 3 Part 2 is focused exclusively on "forgotten" popular writers for children. Denis Butts's study of Barbara Hofland, an early nineteenth-century writer whose books undeniably influenced Victorian writers (Butts traces the influence of *Ellen the Teacher* [1814] on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, for instance, and how Hofland's influence permeates Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* or *David Copperfield*), is followed by Elaine Lomax's chapter on Hesba Stretton (or Sarah Smith), whose novels, sometimes targeting a dual readership, engaged with significant debates of the period, tackling issues related to gender, class or race. Dennis Butts's following essay on G.A. Henty, a journalist and a war correspondent, takes us into the world of adventure novels. Comparing Henty with other far less intensely imperialistic children's writers of the period, such as R.M. Ballantyne, Captain F.W. Marryat, W.H.G. Kingston, Butts also makes explicit the role and marketing strategies that Henty's publisher, Alexander Blackie, used to ensure the gradual commercial success of Henty's formulaic narratives. Lastly, Judy Simmons

studies Angela Brazil's girls' school stories, offering a twentieth-century vision of popular narratives aimed at children.

- 4 The collection does not simply look at popular books through the lens of fiction, however. Part 3, on instructive texts, explores reward books (Kimberley Reynold), popular science books (Aileen Fyfe) and encyclopedias (Gillian Avery), in order to deal with the popularity of such texts which was, perhaps, manipulated. They underline the importance of modes of distribution, such as the influence of the Religious Tract Society which, unlike commercial publishers, aimed to provide pious and didactic books for all. Yet, whether children actually liked these "popular" books is another question. Kim Reynold's chapter on reward books, presenting the emergence of reward books as a publishing activity, clearly separates the books which were written with the reward market in mind (mostly fiction, associated with formulaic sensational narratives and fraught with emotional rhetoric) from books specifically chosen as reward books. Hence the problematic gauging of the popularity of such books, which nonetheless strongly participated in the development of children's literature and the expansion of the market. Aileen Fyfe's chapter on popular science books, as well as Gillian Avery's on encyclopedias, explore alternative definitions of popularity, linked with low prices and high circulation, trends and evolutions of the books' formats, narrative structure, rhetoric, modes of representation, or titles and the selling strategies of publishers (notably Routledge and Longman) to ensure commercial success (hence popularity) from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the later nineteenth century.
- 5 The collection ends on the most productive twentieth and twenty-first century children's writers who achieved huge commercial successes and the connections between them. David Rudd deals with Enid Blyton, her narrative strategies and awareness of her audience and market. Blyton's marketing talent is then compared with Roald Dahl's in the following chapter by Peter Hollingdale, who explains how Dahl, renowned for his educational and philanthropic enterprises, was also popular with his readers because he gave them access to his life events. Lastly, Julian Eccleshare and Stacy Gillis focus on the "Harry Potter" series. Both essays recall the publishing history of the series; they highlight the way J.K. Rowling's novels address preadolescent conflicts which could explain their popularity, as well as their exploitation by other media, and point out how Harry Potter studies may be regarded as barometers of the popularity and the problems of children's literature criticism.
- 6 In short, this collection of no less than sixteen chapters (with the addition of introductions to each part) this publication provides evidence of the significance of studies of children's literature. It offers an overview of the ways in which children's literature and issues of popularity or definitions of the "popular" can be engaged with, and thoroughly examines how popularity functions, proposing a wide-ranging exploration of children's literature. As in any collection, there may be gaps between the individual chapters, but these can only prompt readers to search further into children's literature and criticism.

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Keywords: popular culture, children's literature, Harry Potter, religious tract society, Robin Hood

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